

# Bread or Representation: The Women's Movement in Post Revolution Sudan

Mayada Hassanain and Seraf Sidig

## Abstract

Women's role in the Sudanese revolution of 2019 was celebrated, and their bravery and strength were commended by political parties as well as the international community. Women were hopeful of change. Popular feminist groups rallied around a representation campaign, demanding that 40% of women's representation be guaranteed in the constitutional document and transitional government. Examining the effect of the neoliberal wave on feminist movement building, this article aims to assess the representation agenda from two angles: first, how it became the dominant agenda, and second how effective it was in articulating women's demands and prioritising their economic rights. Through interviews with women's rights activists in Khartoum and North Kordofan, we find that the strength of the representation agenda is its bare minimum quality that brings together women groups from different political, racial, and economic backgrounds. The support the agenda received from the international community, and the assumption that the representation of women in positions of power brings women's issues to the forefront, were important factors in its popularisation. However, according to the women activists, the appointment of women into positions of power did not change the direction of the transitional government agenda, nor was it successful in elevating true representatives to these positions. We conclude by arguing that the structural constraints facing the revolutionary movement played a major role in defining the limitations of resistance in economic justice.

**Keywords:** Sudan, economic rights, representation, feminist movements, neoliberal feminism.

## Introduction

The transitional period following the 2018 December revolution (September 2019 - October 2021), gave civil groups in Sudan a window to build the foundations for a Sudanese State based on the revolution's demands of *Freedom, Peace, and Justice*. The post-revolution environment expanded women's political participation following a break from the fundamentalist rhetoric of the previous Muslim Brotherhood regime and limited civic space (SIHA 2015). In the attempt to create a unified voice, women's political groups came together to demand an increase in female participation in the transitional government and Legislative Council to 40%, not only as a goal, but also as a means to other demands such as economic empowerment and the expansion of political and legal rights.

Despite the clear anti-austerity agenda of the revolution, the transitional period witnessed many economic policies such as the lifting of subsidies and the partial liberalisation of the exchange rate, resulting in 163% inflation in 2020 and 358,9% in 2021 (African Development Bank 2022). These conditions contributed to the increased impoverishment and vulnerability of women (UNICEF 2020; UN Women 2020). Given these harsh realities, the onus was on the popular feminist movement and its political allies to mobilise around a transformative agenda. The experience of the transitional period shows that the representation agenda failed to reach its own goals of increased participation or usher in policies aligned with the demands of the majority of Sudanese women living in poverty. While the representation agenda primarily resonated with the aspirations of women in political spheres by challenging the patriarchal underpinnings of mainstream politics, there is no clear evidence of a distinct grassroots feminist agenda. Following the outbreak of the war in Sudan between the Sudanese Military (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Sudanese women are facing increased violence, economic hardship, and a reversal of recent progress, while the space for mobilisation has been further jeopardised and restricted.

The article makes the connection between what we believe to be the neoliberal influence on the civilian resistance agenda and on the conceptualisation of women's agenda, particularly in the economic sphere. The research was conducted over two years in two states, Khartoum and North Kordofan, and focused on mainstream and fringe bodies in the feminist movement. This allowed

us to examine the contradictions within the feminist movement along geographic, racial, and class lines. The accounts were collected through in-person structured in-depth interviews and analysis of material and content produced and published by these different bodies.

Interviews were conducted with 17 feminists and with women political and civil activists in the capital of Khartoum and Ubbayid city in Northern Kordofan. The respondents included women politicians, members of women empowerment or protection NGOs, issues-based political bodies, and other groups such as labour unions and neighbourhood committees. We paid special attention to representing different age groups, ethnicities, and classes. Additionally, we examined public statements by individuals and institutions, press releases, and materials collected from the beginning of protests in the December 2018 revolution and extending into the transition period, before the breakout of the April 15, 2023 war. As well as descriptive information on organisational makeup and agenda, we also discuss the sources and nature of funding, and activities during the revolution.

## **The Path to the Revolution: Feminist and Popular Organising**

To understand the December revolution, one must place it within the context of decades-long discontent with the authoritarianism, corruption, and failure of public provisioning that characterised policy-making in Sudan after the 1980s, and the rise of neoliberalism. The Muslim Brotherhood regime faced sporadic protests especially in 2012, 2013, and 2016, all triggered by increases in prices of essential commodities. The Sudanese Revolution of 2018 marked a significant turning point in the country's history, as the people protested against the economic crisis characterised by the sharp increase in prices and the scarcity of basic necessities such as bread and fuel. These shortages and price increases were triggered by the independence of South Sudan which resulted in the loss of oil as the main source of foreign currency.

Economic crisis is not a new phenomenon in Sudan's post-independence history. Sudan was one of the first countries to adopt Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). In 1978, the government received financial assistance from the IMF to resolve its budgetary crisis (Bannaga 2005). Between 1977

and 1982, World Bank experts developed policies that focused on cash crops and minerals while cutting subsidies and government spending (Musa and Mohammed 2021; Mkandawire and Soludo 1999). Despite these measures, GDP growth has remained low for over forty years, while social provisioning has deteriorated (Prendergast 1989). The effects of such policies were especially pronounced following State-led liberalisation in the early 1990s, when the State withdrew from providing basic services while it increased its surveillance and security arm (Simsa'a 1998).

Owing to the gender bias of these policies, women in particular were deeply impacted. Tsikata (1995) highlights how SAP policies depend on women's unpaid time to make up for the shortcomings of limited social services. SAPs have resulted in the "re-familiasation" of tasks and placed them on women, effectively using them to absorb economic shocks. Since the 1970s, an increase in unemployment and the migration of men in search of work has resulted in women taking on traditionally male responsibilities while increasingly engaging in precarious work (ILO 2021a). The retreat of the State from public provisioning as well as the rise of armed groups in resource extraction has further exposed women to the double bind of patriarchy and capitalism (Sadasivam 1997).

In 2018, the protests were initially named the "bread protests". This name was rejected by some politicians and activists, who referred to it as limited and demanded that protests be for freedom and against tyranny. While that may be true, the question is why the rejection of hunger and the agitation for public provisioning are not seen as a fundamental part of realising and expanding freedoms. The revolutionary movement itself was characterised by its progressive and flexible nature, as it constantly evolved to reflect the changing dynamics of the struggle. Despite being politically inexperienced, the protesters formulated chants against the Darfur and Yemen wars, demonstrating the movement's commitment to mobilising for progressive politics and breaking away from traditional party politics. In addition to calling for freedom, the chants carried a strong anti-military, anti-imperialist sentiment, particularly in advocating for economic rights and justice.

Leading the revolution was a political coalition called Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) formed around the central goal of ending the rule of Bashir. It featured an array of actors, including the largest political parties and civil

society movements. The coalition played a pivotal role in uniting factions and became the civilian face of the revolution. As protests intensified, the revolution became itself a site of struggle where initial demands were further diluted and morphed into agendas such as the reintegration into the international economy by the national political elite in the FFC following years of economic sanctions on Sudan by the international community (El-Gizouli 2019). In April 2019, the security apparatus of Bashir, including key figures like Abdelfattah Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Hemedi, head of RSF, formed the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and ousted Bashir, due to mounting pressure from protesters. The fall of Bashir marked the beginning of a 52-day sit-in in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum and the beginning of a five-month negotiation process between the FFC and the TMC.

When news broke out during the sit-in that Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, countries which were believed to be supportive of the military faction, and RSF especially, would be sending aid to Sudan, a new chant spontaneously emerged “We don’t want aid from KSA even if we eat Foul and Tamia”. The chant reveals the ways in which revolutionary groups had an advanced understanding of socio-political dynamics and their own interests in the ongoing political process.

Following the violent dispersal of protesters from the sit-in site, through a power-sharing deal between FFC and TMC, the two parties formed the transitional government in September 2019. From the beginning of the negotiation, FFC adopted a quota model to share power between its five civilian groups. This strategy continued at the negotiation table where FFC and TMC battled for higher percentages in the three branches of the transitional government: the Sovereign Council, the Executive Government, and the Legislative Council.

However, the post-revolutionary period brought its own set of challenges. The FFC seemed hesitant to demand any curbing of military involvement in politics or the economy, and was eager to adopt neoliberal policies and approaches in the democratisation process and economic reform. The economic reform strategy, devised by the transitional government and supported by the IMF and the World Bank, introduced essentially an austerity package that included lifting subsidies on wheat, fuel, and electricity, reducing overall expenditure, and devaluing the currency. These measures faced domestic resistance, as they directly impacted the very economic grievances that had fuelled the revolution.

The tension between the aspirations of the revolution and the economic policies implemented underscored the complexities of post-revolutionary Sudan.

As a result of the neoliberal formula already outlined, young men and women leading the revolution had found little access to public provisioning, and in the last decade before the revolution, a deepening crisis had left them with no economic opportunities. They were invested in a much more radical transformation of the economic and political structure, as stated in the charter put forth by the resistance committees in late 2022. The charter demanded that economic policymaking be reclaimed to focus on domestic resource mobilisation and not on guidance from international financial institutions (Sudanese Resistance Committees 2022)

To the surprise of the international media, Sudanese women have resisted the Bashir government in many ways. In 2012, women university students protested problems in dormitories, austerity measures, and increases in transportation fares (Medani 2019). The Women Tea Sellers Association, which has a membership of approximately 15,000 in the informal sector in Khartoum, engages regularly in various forms of resistance including protests and advocacy for social provisioning. Groups such as No to Women's Oppression, and organisations such as the Strategic Initiative for Women in Africa (SIHA) played a prominent role in supporting women's rights. Naturally, the revolutionary movement included women who were always politically aware and actively opposed the patriarchal systems that were reinforced and codified into law under Bashir's government.

From the onset, women's rights activists in the revolution unified under the Sudanese Women in Civic and Political Groups (MANSAM), a broad-based coalition aimed at increasing equal representation and centring women's rights in the revolutionary agenda and policy-making in post-revolution Sudan. Abbas (2022, 5) describes the birth of the MANSAM as "the last attempt to unite women activists from all backgrounds in a common front to fight for women's rights and to avoid their constant misuse as wings of patriarchal political parties in Sudan. It brought together many women who were wary of male-dominated politics derailing the women's agenda for the benefit of central state political gains achieved through exploiting women for their votes and political labour." Groups had to put aside their ideological positions to form a unified feminist/women's

agenda which, in order to garner mass support from within the movement, needed to ignore class and racial differences that would necessarily produce different positions and demands. This strategy is not new in women's politics; in response to the patriarchal nature of political parties, (El-Karib 2021), an institutional practice emerged of having women only groups talking about women's issues. This was positive insofar as it challenged the notions of rigid gender roles during the Bashir era, but it limited feminist activism to a focus on the visibility of women in the political space without putting any effort into developing feminist agendas.

Along with NAHT and No to the Oppression of Women, MANSAM was the de facto leading body representing women's issues post-revolution through direct representation in the FFC or through their participation in other initiatives or coalitions (Abbas 2022). Women and feminist bodies focused on advocating for women's representation in the political and negotiation process, and saw the civilian transition government as a natural evolution of women's critical participation in the revolution. This included the Sovereign Council, the Executive Government and the Legislative Council. However, other than weighing in on the set agenda by the FFC, little was being done by feminist organisations to develop a consensus around the agenda women would pursue during the transition period once represented.

## **Neoliberal Feminism in Sudan: The Making of the Representation Agenda**

In the last decades, neoliberalism has defined the political landscape and the space for movement building, as well as the livelihood and welfare of citizens in much of the Global South. In essence, neoliberalism emphasises market fundamentalism advocated by scholars, policy makers and institutions. David Harvey (2007, 2) defines neoliberalism as "... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade". To understand how the Sudanese feminist movements' politics were shaped by the neoliberal discourse, we draw on a more nuanced definition of neoliberalism

articulated by Fine and Saad-Filho (2017, 686) “*as a material structure of social, economic and political reproduction*”. We argue that in the democratisation process and economic direction set by the FFC-TMC transition agreement, and given the global wave of neoliberalisation in feminist politics and the institutional nature of women and feminist organisations, women pursued a deradicalised representation agenda, and by extension championed or passively accepted neoliberal economic policies detrimental to the aspirations of improved livelihoods expressed by Sudanese women in the revolution.

The making of this agenda shows the impacts of neoliberalism on the feminist movement generally, and on the Sudanese civil and political society especially, where neoliberalism can be linked to the derailment of structural demands and economic rights. Globally, Sudan is not unique. Coming out of the devastating economic impacts of SAPs, major global events such as the 1995 Beijing conference put forth a new agenda for women, based primarily on the UN human rights framework. The conference focused on strategies for women’s mobilisation around forming electoral quotas, leadership training, and promotion of women’s political participation, prioritising access to power as the main agenda (Tripp et al. 2008). Scholars such as Frasier (2017) note the “liberalisation” of feminist demands to form what Rottenberg (2014) defined as being dominated by the promotion of concepts such as individual freedom and empowerment, and the adherence to the laws of market liberalisation. Neoliberal feminism is defined as the integration of women’s equality into the economic rationale of neoliberal ideology and governance policy. In essence the replacement of collective struggle for social change with notions of self-help, entrepreneurial spirit, and psychologies of positivity produced two types of women: those able to succeed under capitalism and those exploited by capitalism (Rottenberg 2014). In neoliberal feminist discourse, representation is watered down and reinterpreted as a means of regaining control from an interventionist State and achieving freedom by participating in the free market (Leal 2007).

The choice of adopting representation as the main agenda was determined by Sudanese women’s belief that political participation and representation for women in legislative and executive bodies is a prerequisite for change in women’s status and rights. As one member of the Sudanese Women’s Union (SWU) in North Kordofan states, “... *the biggest changes we were able to achieve for women*



*occurred when we elected the first women to parliament*; in her view, this is a tried and tested tactic. This view, however, ignores the nature of the feminist movement at the time, its grassroots mobilisation and the political nature of the government in which these changes were enacted. More so, this approach was critiqued even during that time. The SWU, which was ideologically affiliated with the Communist party, was accused of being the wing of the patriarch (Hale 1986), prioritising only the party's political priorities and ignoring the gendered roles and burdens of care work on women.

This belief is further supported by the critical mass theory underlying mainstream consensus within liberal feminist policy-making in the aftermath of the Beijing conference: that a “critical minority” at 30% is necessary for women to have significant power and decision-making. This strategy was successfully implemented in many African countries, where representation jumped from 7,7% of women in legislative positions in 1990 to 22% in 2015 (IDEA 2023). As the utility of representation in and of itself was the sole consideration, there was no agenda to be pursued, should women be selected, and no mechanism to ensure accountability. In fact, groups or women who were perceived to be partisan or have a preference for a transformative agenda were considered to be divisive. This opinion was echoed by many of the women we interviewed, who, despite their disagreement with some of the female candidates during the transitional period, stressed that speaking out against them might undermine the already fragile position that women have in the political space.

The institutional evolution of Sudanese feminist organisations in the past decades also played a part in setting the representation agenda. Under threat of the authoritarian Bashir regime, the cost of political mobilising and organising was high, especially for women. As a result, NGOs became a safe space for women to engage in feminist organising. The professionalisation gave women a sense of stability and protection but has also resulted in concessions and dependence in agenda-making. National NGOs, including those under MANSAM, depended on funding from international donors and therefore adopted on-trend programmes associated with neoliberal development policies such as those aimed at economic empowerment through microfinance and capacity-building programmes. This dependency is a characteristic of the NGOisation of feminism, defined by Chakraborty (2021) as the co-option and erasure of critical social

movements associated with the depoliticisation of feminism itself. The features of NGOisation include institutionalisation, professionalisation, depoliticisation, and demobilisation of movements (Lang 2012).

Similarly, Cornwall and Goetz (2005) argue that the efforts to increase women's participation gained traction when they became an explicit goal of the United Nations Sustainable Developmental Goals and attached to more funding. In Sudan, international organisations such as UN Women and IDEA were focused on representation and political participation and provided funding for this agenda to NGOs and rights groups which adhered to this agenda despite internal preferences. A member of MANSAM told us that one of the biggest projects they implemented during the transitional period, a national-level mapping of possible candidates to be selected for the Legislative Council, was supported by UNDP/UNWOMEN. Interestingly, at the time the FFC seemed to have no interest in forming the Legislative Council, and the women's movement again seemed to be on the fringes. The role these organisations played is complex; while there was no force per se, national organisations understood that the funding channels and mandates were non-negotiable and pre-set, leaving no room for different types of projects. An employee at IDEA indicated that during initial meetings and consultation about priorities, there was consensus on representation being an end goal and very little discussion about elements of economic policy or different priorities. Another young feminist told us they were threatened with the termination of funding from an international organisation if their project did not focus on women's political empowerment. They had wanted to undertake a project related to unpaid labour and care work.

Despite their differences from mainstream feminist groups in membership, mode of organisation, and agenda, the political participation agenda (or representation) was a priority even for poor women and those from periphery and rural areas. While these women complained that their concerns were not being prioritised, they too stressed the importance of political participation, albeit by working class women. This can be attributed to the penetration of representation as a political tactic into the mainstream. Here we see that influence over agenda can be achieved through power dynamics and the perceived professionalism of the INGO-set agenda. In an agenda brainstorming exercise conducted by a prominent Sudanese feminist NGO, we witnessed the process whereby the

priorities of women were slowly streamlined to fit a representation agenda in an almost hypnotising manner; this tactic was repeated in several focus groups across eight states.

The argument about the impact of the neoliberalisation of feminism is not that there is a problem with representation as a feminist demand. Rather, it is the lack of substance, which makes the economic justice agenda almost an empty vase ready to be filled by austerity and market-centred reform, even by women who have a much higher stake in questions of economic reform. The class bias inherent in the neoliberalisation of feminism is illustrated by a comment, made by a MANSAM member and the only female representative in the FFC central committee, at a meeting organised by MANSAM aimed at gendering the FFC's plan for the transitional period, that adding a clause on the importance of paid maternity leave for domestic workers would "make our life difficult". Although the comment was said as a light joke, it embodied the class conflict being brushed aside under the slogans of women's unity.

Once selected, the design of the representation agenda by Sudanese feminist groups in the revolution adopted features to fit the model of individual exceptionalism of the technocrat official carved out by the wider political consensus and process. This meant that, as opposed to challenging the inherited hierarchical structure within the women's movement, women who held professional titles, were part of the political elite, and by extension, from middle or upper-middle-class groups, were more likely to be selected for political and executive positions (Hashim 2018).

In the absence of an agenda and by organising around the bare minimum as a unifying effort, demanding representation became the ultimate proclamation and the only goal of feminist politics. According to one interviewee, a prevailing expectation was that, prior to advocating for equality, feminists should first establish a shared agenda. This reflects a bias, wherein women are perceived as a homogenous group. Despite frustrations expressed by feminists regarding the lack of a similar directive for men to unite, this issue was not systematically contested. It is conceivable that feminists recognised the strategic value of strength in numbers against entrenched misogyny, and the numbers favoured a focus on political representation as the main agenda.

## How did the Representation Agenda Perform?

The constitutional document specified that at least 40% of seats in the transitional government would be reserved for women (George et al. 2019). However, this was not realised in terms of bringing about the level of representation to 40% or ensuring a diverse representation. From the beginning of the negotiation stage, women in Khartoum expressed dissatisfaction with the civilian coalition. They felt that they were being tokenised and used as symbols of progress. Initially, two women represented women and neighbourhood committees in the negotiations, but one was later replaced by a man, leaving only the other to carry the burden of representation (Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2020). This imbalance of power inside the civilian negotiation team continued. In fact, during the negotiation between the military and the civilian group, the only female negotiator was told by one of the moderators to keep silent and called a “*little girl*”. In the government, only two women were included in the eleven-person Sovereign Council, three women were appointed heads of ministries out of 19 ministerial positions, and two women were appointed as governors in Sudan’s 18 states after the FFC’s initial list of 18 governor nominees which included no women.

Women interpreted the inability to reach the goal differently. While women in Khartoum talked about the resistance they encountered in trying to reach the set quota, women in El-Ubbayid and grassroots groups in both states were sceptical either of the feasibility of the goal or its ability to represent the “right” group of women. Women’s groups organised around livelihoods and labour issues, such as the Women’s Cooperation Union, were disappointed that the representation agenda did not include working-class women.

In our conversation with the leader of a prominent political party in El-Ubbayid, she expressed the view that the goal of 40% representation was too high, especially for women in the periphery. “*As feminists, we are not deserving of the 40%, we are still weak and don’t have the power or authority to take our rights and fight for them; that takes time. [...] Personally, I would’ve loved to say increase the representation percentage to 50% but I don’t have the confidence to demand something like that*”. This sentiment was shared by others who believed that given the long history of exclusion from leadership, women were not prepared or available to take positions within the transition period.

Upon reflection, we noted that one of the shortcomings of the representation goal was that it limited itself to “official” positions within the transitional period. In fact, based on the testimonies and sentiments of women, and on our observations, the participation of women at other levels of political life through grassroots bodies was much higher and more diverse. Women were far more active in neighbourhood committees, labour and professional unions, demand groups, and volunteer initiatives. Younger women had different concerns compared to their older counterparts interviewed. They expressed dissatisfaction with the roles assigned to them in grassroots groups and felt overqualified, unlike the older women who felt they were unqualified or lacked experience and confidence.

This is not to minimise the challenge faced by younger women in grassroots spaces. In fact, the patriarchal culture of neighbourhood committees and grassroots groups often had dangerous consequences for such young women. In one case, a young neighbourhood committee member from North Kordofan described an incident where threatening letters were sent to her home, which prompted her family to have her brother accompany her to committee meetings. Elsewhere, women who worked within the transitional government also remarked that women within the civil society nominated to work in the transitional government gave up their positions in response to instances of harassment and misogyny from male colleagues. Unfortunately, women at all levels of participation experienced intense backlash when speaking out against these cases and were accused of trying to tarnish the legacy of the revolution.

## Whose Agenda?

### *Economic reform and women in Sudan*

The first test of the commitment to economic justice came during the lockdown announced by the transitional government in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This presented a unique challenge to women due to loss of income and an already non-existent social protection system. After the announcement of the lockdown, representatives from the tea and food sellers association met with Lena Elshiekh (the Minister of Labour and Social Development) to request direct support for thousands of women in Khartoum who had lost their income during the lockdown; she in turn requested lists of

members so they could be given food hampers and cash assistance to compensate for lost income. However, a large majority of women did not receive support for the duration of the three-month lockdown (ILO 2021b). The minister also initiated the process and direction for the national social protection strategy which was essentially a continuation of social protection projects under the previous regime that focused on cash transfers and reduced welfare services. Featured was a temporary family income support project that aimed to alleviate the impact of the lifting of subsidies and mitigate other harsh economic measures.

Asha Musa, who was appointed to the Sovereign Council, nominated by the coalition of civil forces and celebrated by many given her long history of activism and experience in politics within the SWU, was criticised as inactive during her time in the Sovereign Council, or as one interviewee said “*her appointment at the Sovereign Council was like male breasts ... useless*”. A substantive criticism levelled at her was that some of her actions were often in direct conflict with pro-poor women policies and programmes, which she claimed to prioritise. One incident that was often cited to support this argument occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when she publicly reprimanded the leader of the Women’s Food and Beverage Union for accusing her of not keeping her promise to distribute support for women in the food and beverage sector who faced a particular shortage of income due to the lockdown enforced on public spaces where they worked (Mukashfi 2020).

Feminist groups including MANSAM have engaged with the economic agenda. In fact, MANSAM has a thematic group dedicated to socio-economic issues. However, their responses have also been articulated through the lens of neoliberal policy. MANSAM’s socio-economic empowerment work still primarily focuses on capacity-building for women and access to finance. Women groups uncritically accepted this neoliberal path and focused their efforts on leadership and vocational training. Even those which had a self-proclaimed leftist ideological leaning, such as the SWU branch in El-Ubbaiyd, conducted training on hand crafts and other self-help activities for women in the city. Saeed Nafsak, a self-help group whose membership is all poor, IDP women from peri-urban Khartoum, offers training on income generating activities, including soap-making and petty trading, for which funding is usually received from prominent rights organisations.

Critics of this approach challenge the ability of such programmes to remove women from the cycle of poverty and achieve social and political independence. Microcredit for microloans has not been found to alter family structures and in fact could become disempowering when credit is given over to males in the family (Burra et al. 2005). Far from benign, Weber (2006) explains how microfinance reinforces the restructuring of the market towards financial liberalisation but has failed to create an upward cycle based on saving and reinvestment. In reality, recipients of microcredit use loans for direct consumption needs due to the lack of social protection systems and may end up in cycles of debt, furthering their vulnerability.

Nonetheless, this market-oriented approach views women's economic empowerment and presents gender equality as achievable through investment in women as entrepreneurs (Cornwall 2008). The integration of gender into development has resulted in a simplification of feminist processes by focusing on supplying missing elements required for women's empowerment (leadership and business skills, micro-loans, etc.) and substituting these processes with a mechanical and depoliticised process administered by technical professionals (Benería et al. 2015). In a paper discussing the origins of empowerment and its current diversion from the understanding during the early 1990s, Cornwall (2016) gives three important insights into what was first envisioned as empowerment. Firstly, empowerment is about changing power relations; secondly, empowerment is relational; and finally, empowerment is a process and not a fixed location. Contrary to its current apolitical identity, empowerment was a political movement that challenged structures of patriarchy, class and ethnicity Batliwala (2007). Batliwala points out that empowerment was initially synonymous with political liberation groups; however, the meaning of the term evolved in the 1990s with the increased adoption of neo-liberal policies that had to be accountable to the poor, who constitute the largest voting bloc, and so had to be manageable and narrow. These policies were restricted to two areas: supporting women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship programmes, and reserving seats for women in government, which later evolved into results-driven, rights-based approaches managed by professionals such as policy experts, lawyers, and NGO personnel (Batliwala 2007).

*The struggle for economic justice and the transformative power of representation*

When the transitional government was appointed, the economic crisis was one of the main things it was expected to address. The government began to lay out its economic recovery plan, which predominantly mirrored structural adjustment programmes. The government signed a staff-monitored programme with the IMF, cementing its commitment to economic orthodoxy. The response to the economic reforms was not uniform. Revolutionary forces thought re-engaging with the international community and global financial markets was necessary for Sudan. The IMF and the donor community had made it clear that debt relief could not be triggered through the HIPC programme unless the reforms, especially those pertaining to commodity subsidies and currency devaluation, were put in place.

Women groups (namely MANSAM), working with UN Women, organised a conference on gendering the economy and discussed the importance of involving women. Criticism of the cash transfer programme was limited to its inadequacy to meet livelihood needs. Conceptually, there did not seem to be an understanding of the broader ideological project at the centre of cash transfers as substitutes for social protection. The main problem with cash transfer programmes is that they do not challenge or respond to the main demand of public provisioning. Instead, they depend on facilitating consumption at the subsistence level and end up integrating women into markets without protecting them from the inherent risk of volatility. More so, cash transfer programmes are usually offered in the context of austerity, which means they do not offer any solutions for structural concerns around employment and job creation to ease the dependence on such programmes. The prioritisation of market-based solutions to women's economic problems was not identified as a concern.

Discussing economic policy and economic rights is intimidating. Economics has for decades been seen as a purely technical endeavour, not to be touched by non-economists. This understanding was very strong during the discussions of the reform plans. The community engagement the government promised to do was essentially a propaganda and communication exercise aimed at fostering consensus around the reforms and leaving little room for actual dialogue. In an interview with a representative of MANSAM, we learned that



even though internally women were uncomfortable with the austerity measures and their anticipated impact on them, MANSAM did not officially denounce or reject the policies. They felt ill-equipped to do so and unprepared to express their disagreement without a ready alternative set of policies. As one young woman told us, *“we are still at the beginning of the more inclusive movement building and this divergence is discussed at the level of dialogue but has not yet translated to action and mobilisation; however, when it comes to the issue of economic policy it is even at a more elementary stage because we’re still understanding what terms like ‘gendering budgets’ mean and they are presented in very general terms that are difficult to relate to.”*

Overall, the assessment of women’s participation in the transitional government has not been positive. Through our analysis, different reasons can be adduced to explain the inability of the participation agenda to play a transformative role. To begin with, there is the underestimation of the role of organisation, political mobilisation, and institutional accountability. This was further complicated by the fact that while women were granted 40% representation, this quota was not exclusively nominated by women or feminist organisations. For instance, the governor in the Northern state was the nominee of the Sudanese Congress Party. Women we spoke to from her state claimed that the governor did not make any effort to work with women or feminist bodies and was constantly surrounded by and working with members of her party. Cornwall and Goetz (2005) support sentiment by pointing out that while the quota system has allowed for increased participation of women, this does not mean that women will advocate for explicitly women-friendly policies. They argue that while reservations are intended to give women power within their communities and political parties with the aim of increasing party majority, seats are still divided among parties because women do not operate as a stand-alone political community. This places an unfair responsibility on women who are expected to act outside of their own party’s interest.

Research also showed that when women are used merely as a means to increase political majority but receive limited political apprenticeship, it leads to their inability to act effectively in executive or legislative positions (Cornwall and Goetz 2005). This point was echoed where women felt that many lacked the skills and experience to put forth a women’s agenda once they were in prominent positions. Despite its shortcomings, one participant credited the representation

agenda with offering women an opportunity to gain experience “...most of the women had no experience, they were never leaders, they were never in high positions and now they are forced to be in this role. But this experience had to happen, and it is important for developing leadership”. This opinion is supported by Yoon (2004) who has underscored the important role leadership experience plays in increasing women’s confidence and willingness to participate in public office.

Another reason put forth for the lack of a transformative agenda is that women as a group are not homogeneous and what might be transformative for one group can be oppressive or regressive for another. Al-Badri (2005), in examining the first experience of Sudanese women’s participation in the late 1960s, shows the bias in issues championed as a representation of the priorities of urban educated women. In fact, in her research on the SWU, Hale (1986) notes the unwillingness of union members to address issues such as the increasingly rigid sexual division of labour, or to move beyond encouraging more women to enter the increasingly capitalistic public sector and work on reforms within that context. In the wake of the 2018 revolution, this conflict in priorities was again observed by women from North Kordofan in the street sellers’ movement; they felt that there was no gain to be made from a political movement spearheaded by professional women whom they often saw as aggressors or as selfish politicians. One woman in North Kordofan who works as a street seller remarked that “we don’t trust ‘professional’ working women except teachers because they are also suffering like us”. As an alternative, women street sellers built alliances with male street-seller groups and demand groups facing similar marginalisation and harassment by the State.

From our observations, the inability to generate an alternative vision was also a major shortcoming. In our discussion with a member of the cooperative’s coalition in Khartoum concerning the performance of women representatives in the transition period of civilian government, critiques were focused on the class and ethnic identity of the representatives and not their connection or accountability to the movement. Periphery grassroots groups who have prioritised the issue of livelihoods also failed at articulating tools or a transformative agenda beyond participation or the “right kind” of representation. Similarly, in North Kordofan, the Tajamua’ Alnisai, a group of mostly young women in neighbourhood committees, could not translate their self-described radical

leanings into a separate or concrete agenda for women's issues, again failing to set a baseline for measuring any sort of adherence to the cause of women or their performance besides their participation and some lip service regarding individual freedoms. Leftist women groups such as the SWU expressed an alternative economic agenda seen clearly in their coordination and coalition with other radical groups outside the feminist movement in pressing demands such as calls for free health and education, and for making reproduction an official responsibility of the State. Even the women who are active in other pressure groups that revolve around economic issues, such the anti-dam movement, do not articulate these as feminist demands.

The findings also illustrate the limitations created by the policies of the transitional government, and the limited space for reform amidst the involvement of the military and the imposition of the international community. This was apparent in an April 2021 protest organised by different feminist groups predominantly made up of younger individuals. Protest members held signs demanding women's participation in politics and the rejection of patriarchy and misogyny, but there were also signs which demanded free health and education (Nasreldin 2021). Women reported that when introducing reforms they faced pushback from both male colleagues and women in all levels of governmental and civil bodies. Young women noted during interviews that men within neighbourhood committees were not open to discussing the rights of women or other groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. Women also struggled within the transitional government to amend discriminatory laws. They have also voiced their frustration regarding the inability of the government to ratify international women's rights conventions such as CEDAW, citing cowardice and misogyny on the part of the transitional government.

Finally, the deprioritisation of economic policy was not unique to the women's movement. Other groups, such as neighbourhood committees, political parties, and civil society groups were not critically engaged with the economic reform policy proposed by the transitional government. Despite our criticism of the representation agenda due to its lack of substantive contribution to the feminist cause, we acknowledge the structural limitations which feminists have to overcome in order to exist and continue to try and articulate their stances on the questions of economic justice.

Perhaps one lesson that was learned after the October coup was that ignoring the economy and livelihood comes at a high cost. It became clear to the revolutionary movement that economic reforms have failed to address structural questions about the Sudanese economy, such as the creation and distribution of wealth and the vested interests of military, paramilitary and regional powers in Sudan's resources. After the coup, the political space narrowed, as most of the efforts went into reversing the military coup carried out by Abdelfatah Burhan, head of the Armed Forces, and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo Hemedti. A different variant of political representation came into play, with neighbourhood committees leading protests and young women demanding better representation. This signifies a shift in mobilization that it is represented at a more granular level of politics, which may allow for more diverse discussions between the various groups and within the feminist movement itself.

## Conclusion

Research for this paper started with the assumption that the feminist agenda was captured by Khartoum-based elite feminists and women's organisations who were imposing their own views on other women, ignoring the demands of rural and poor women regarding economic justice. This is only partly true. While the representation agenda did speak mostly to the desires of women politicians who were pushing against the patriarchal nature of popular politics, there is no grassroots feminist movement *per se*. This does not mean that rural and poor women are not aware of the centrality of their livelihood issues. However, such women experience various levels of societal and political disenfranchisement which stipulate a specific form of inclusion into feminist movements contingent on their loyalty to the centrality of representation.

We discuss how the representation agenda had the ability to unify women and was an easy thing to agree on. However, a deeper look showed that this unity was fragile and topical. The backlash on the lack of women's representation and political participation was seen as a greater threat than representation by women who held regressive economic or social positions, or at least did not ascribe to any political position. Indeed, the performance of women representatives in the transition period of the civilian government drew loud dissatisfaction from both elite women and feminist politicians, and rank-and-file members of the feminist movement. In effect, the experience called into question the role that ethnic and class differences might play in identifying agendas, and, unfortunately, created a level of mistrust and a rift between seasoned women politicians and grassroots women's groups.

Women groups, especially in Khartoum, prioritised representation as a way to feel empowered against the patriarchal processes and institutions they had to confront. However, they gave little attention to the post-representation reality. In this sense, the political participation agenda itself is not necessarily a problem. Rather, it is unclear how it leads to the realisation of economic rights across the country. The lumping together of women in the representation agenda led to the shelving of many issues that were not only important but could have been a strategic way for the women's movement to become more influential and relevant after the revolution.

## Notes

1. Interviewees have requested to remain anonymous. Identification of interviewees will be coded based on state and numerical value corresponding to order of interview.
2. Cheap local types of food made from beans and lentils. Its use here is intended to signal economic disenfranchisement.
3. NAHT is the Forum of Women in Forces of Freedom and Change
4. NK03. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid. 25 March 2022.
5. NK04. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid .25 March 2022. NK01. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid .25 March 2022.
6. KH06. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 11 July 2021.
7. KH01. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 02 May 2021
8. KH03. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 22 May 2021
9. KH07. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 14 July 2021.
10. KH09. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 23 July 2021.
11. Author's Personal Notes. Khartoum. 5 October 2019.
12. KH05. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 01 July 2021
13. KH10. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 23 July 2021
14. NK02. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid. 25 March 2022.
15. NK08. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. El-Ubbayid. 27 March 2021
16. NK09. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. El-Ubbayid. 27 March 2021
17. KH01. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 02 May 2021

18. NK02. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid. 25 March 2022.
19. KH11. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 26 July 2021
20. NS01. Interviewed by Author. WhatsApp call recording. Northern State. 01 July 2022
21. NK05. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid .26 March 2022.
22. NK05. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid .26 March 2022.
23. The use of the term “Radical” here is a verbatim translation form the Arabic word “Jizriya” which originates from a word “Jizr” meaning root. The term is associated with a faction within Sudanese civil society which is considered leftist or against incremental change and push for radical change, removing from the root.

## References

- Abbas, Reem. 2022. "We Have Been Quiet for so Long. Sudanese Women's Coalitions in Post-Revolution Sudan". SaferWorld. <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1403-awe-have-been-quiet-for-so-long-a-sudanese-womenas-coalitions-in-post-revolution-sudan>
- African Development Bank. "Sudan Economic Outlook." Website. Accessed 22 May 2022 <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa/sudan/sudan-economic-outlook#:~:text=The%20central%20bank%20adopted%20an,over%2080%25%20of%20total%20assets>
- Al-Badri, Balghis. 2005. "Feminist Perspectives in the Sudan – An Analytical Overview." Paper presented at the "Feminist Perspectives" workshop, Free University, Berlin, May 26-27, 2005.
- Bannaga, Alamedin A. 2005. "The Impact of Adjustment Policies on Sudan's Economic Growth: Empirical Investigation." *World Review of Science, Technology and Sustainable Development* 2(3-4): 352-376. <https://doi.org/10.1504/WRSTSD.2005.007693>
- Batliwala, Srilatha. 2007. "Taking the Power out of Empowerment – An Experiential Account." *Development in Practice* 17(4-5): 557-565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469559>
- Benería, Lourdes, Günsel Berik and Maria Floro. 2015. *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as If All People Mattered*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- BBC News. 2013. "Sudan Fuel Unrest: Many Die in Khartoum as Riots Continue." *BBC News*, 25 September. Accessed 23 June 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-24272835>
- Burra, Neera, Joy Deshmukh-Ranadive and Ranjani K. Murthy, eds. 2005. *Micro-credit, Poverty and Empowerment: Linking the Triad*. Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132102137>
- Chakraborty, Proshant. 2021. Rethinking NGOization as Postfeminist Practice: Interstitial Intimacies and Negotiations of Neoliberal Subjectivity in Violence Prevention. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, 654909.☒
- Cornwall, Andrea and Anne Marie Goetz. 2005. "Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives." *Democratization* 12(5): 783-800. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340500322181>



- Cornwall, Andrea. 2008. "Unpacking 'Participation': Models, Meanings and Practices". *Community Development Journal* 43(3): 269-283. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn010>
- Cornwall, Andrea, 2016. "Women's Empowerment: What Works?". *Journal of International Development* 28(3): 342-359. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3210>
- El Gizouli, Magdi. 2019. "Class Dynamics, Dissemination of the Sudanese Uprising". Noria Research.
- El-Karib, Asha K. *Gender Assessment of Political Parties' Internal Regulations in Sudan*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2021.65>
- Fine, Ben and Alfredo Saad-Filho. 2017. "Thirteen Things you Need to Know About Neoliberalism." *Critical Sociology* 43(4-5): 685-706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920516655387>
- George, Rachel, Mashair Saeed and Sara Abdelgalil. 2019. "Women at the Forefront of Sudan's Political Transformation: Recommendations from a Workshop on Women's Rights, Representation and Resilience in a New Sudan." Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Working Paper 566, November 2019. [https://www.academia.edu/78523180/Women\\_at\\_the\\_forefront\\_of\\_Sudan\\_s\\_political\\_transformation\\_recommendations\\_from\\_a\\_workshop\\_on\\_women\\_s\\_rights\\_representation\\_and\\_resilience\\_in\\_a\\_new\\_Sudan](https://www.academia.edu/78523180/Women_at_the_forefront_of_Sudan_s_political_transformation_recommendations_from_a_workshop_on_women_s_rights_representation_and_resilience_in_a_new_Sudan)
- Hale, Sondra. 1986. "Sudanese Women and Revolutionary Parties: The Wing of the Patriarch." *MERIP Middle East Report* 138: 25-30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011907>
- Harvey, David. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hashim, Fahima. 2018. "Political Economy of Violence Against Women in Sudan." Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) Discussion Paper #12, January 2018. [https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Political-Economy-of-Violence-Against-Women-in-Sudan\\_DAWN-discussion-paper12.pdf](https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Political-Economy-of-Violence-Against-Women-in-Sudan_DAWN-discussion-paper12.pdf)
- International IDEA. 2023. Gender Quotas Database, Regions Overview. Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> June 2022 <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database>

- ILO. 2021a. *Rapid Assessment of the Socio-economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic with a Focus on Khartoum, West Kordofan and East Darfur, Sudan*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---ddg\\_p/documents/publication/wcms\\_831247.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---ddg_p/documents/publication/wcms_831247.pdf)
- ILO. 2021b. *Extension of Social Protection Coverage to Workers in the Informal Economy in Sudan*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---ddg\\_p/documents/publication/wcms\\_856609.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---ddg_p/documents/publication/wcms_856609.pdf)
- Lang, Sabine. 2012. *NGOs, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139177146>
- Leal, Pablo Alejandro. 2007. "Participation: The Ascendancy of a Buzzword in the Neo-liberal Era." *Development in Practice* 17(4-5), 539-548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469518>
- Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs (Brown University). "Background to Revolution. New Sudan Voices". 18 October 2019. YouTube Video. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxgYhVL\\_6w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxgYhVL_6w)
- Mkandawire, Thandika and Charles C. Soludo. 1999. *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment*. CODESRIA, Africa World Press and IDRC.
- Mukashfi, H. 2020. "م.م عطال او ياشل ا تاعى اب". <https://www.alnilin.com/13130310.htm>
- Musa, Almadi Musa Attahir and Omer Abdulrahman Mohammed. 2021. "Assessment the Structural Adjustment Policies in Sudan via (VECM) Model Through the Period 1989-2019." *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology* 6(1). <https://bit.ly/38XzaDr>
- Fraser, Nancy. 2017. "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History." In *Citizenship Rights* edited by Igor Sticks and Jo Shaw, 393-413. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315260211>
- Nasreldin, Ilaf. 2021. "Sudanese Women March for Protection Against Gender Based Violence." *CHR Michelsen Institute* (blog), 2021. Accessed 17 October 2022 <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7766-sudanese-women-march-for-protection-against-gender-based-violence>
- Prendergast, John. 1989. "Blood Money for Sudan: World Bank and IMF to the 'Rescue'." *Africa Today* 36(3/4): 43-53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4186585>

- Rottenberg, Catherine. 2014. "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism." *Cultural Studies* 28(3): 418-437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361>
- Sadasivam, Bharati. 1997. "The Impact of Structural Adjustment on Women: A Governance and Human Rights Agenda." *Human Rights Quarterly* 19(3): 630-665. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/762727>
- SIHA Network. 2015. "Third-Class Citizens: Women and Citizenship in Sudan." A Paper on Women's Struggle for Equal Citizenship in Sudan, September 2015. <http://www.sihanet.org/publications/third-class-citizens-women-and-citizenship-in-sudan/>
- Simsa'a, Layla El Awad. 1998. "Structural Adjustment Policies and Women in the Rural Areas in Africa: A Review of Some Major Issues". *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement* 23(3/4) : 135-147. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24482735>
- Sudanese Resistance Committees. 2022. The Revolutionary Charter for Establishing People's Power. <https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/the-revolutionary-charter-for-establishing-peoples-power.pdf>
- Tønnessen, Liv and Samia Al-Nagar. 2020. "Patriarchy, Politics and Women's Activism in Post-Revolution Sudan." CHR Michlsen Institute Sudan Brief, 2020. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7267-patriarchy-politics-and-womens-activism-in-post-revolution-sudan>
- Tripp, Aili, Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesiga and Alice Mungwa. 2008. "The Rise of the New Women's Movements." In *African Women's Movements: Transforming Political Landscapes*, edited by Aili Tripp, Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesiga and Alice Mungwa, 62-80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511800351>
- Tsikata, Dzodzi. 1995. "Effects of Structural Adjustment on Women and the Poor." *Third World Resurgence* 61(62): 1-8.
- UNWomen. 2020. "Gender Data Gaps and Country Performance." UNWomen. Accessed 1 October 2022. <https://data.unwomen.org/country/sudan>
- UNICEF Sudan. 2020. *Gender Annual Report*. Sudan: UNICEF Sdan. <https://www.unicef.org/sudan/media/6131/file/Gender%20.pdf>
- Weber, Heloise. 2006. "The Global Political Economy of Microfinance and Poverty Reduction." In *Microfinance: Perils and Prospects*, edited by Jude Fernando, 43-63. London: Routledge.

Yoon, Mi Yung. 2004. "Explaining Women's Legislative Representation in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 29(3): 447-468. <https://doi.org/10.3162/036298004X201258>